

Sermon Series – “Call to be...”

Sermon #3 – “Equip people...”

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“The Lord never gives you more than you can handle.” You know that old Christian cliché. I don’t particularly like that saying. First of all, it implies that whatever bad things come our way, the Lord decided to give them to us. “Let’s see, Kory looks bored, let’s give him a sore throat and a flat tire.” Secondly, there are times in life when it DOES feel like we can’t handle all that’s on our plates. And when those times happen, it’s hard to find solace in these kinds of trite Christian sayings.

For some folks, right now is one of those times when it may feel like there’s more going on than we can handle. I’ve heard from a lot of people in the last few weeks who are anxious about this time of transition in the church. When faced with change and an unknown future, it may feel like God is absent and our burdens are too heavy. Is this one of those times when we DO have more than we can handle?

Just because the cliché may be overused doesn’t mean there’s not some truth in it. The second part of our mission statement says, “We are called to equip people with a Christ-centered faith that works in real life.” For me, the key to that phrase is “works in real life,” because what good is our faith if we only use it on Sunday morning? When real life happens in the form of change or crises or a series of flat tire frustrations, what role should our faith play in helping us cope?

In this sermon I’m not going to spend much time on the “how-to” part of this statement about equipping. There are a lot of very good, very different ways we can help equip people in their faith. Some of those we have done here at CCC, but in hindsight I wish we had done more in this area. The fact that we didn’t is solely my responsibility. But you will have continued opportunities to equip yourselves and others with the tools of faith.

The question to ask is not “How?” but “Why?” Why should we be equipped? Can’t we just take it as it comes, roll with the punches, go with the flow? No. We can try, but at some point a wave of crisis is going to crash over us and we will find ourselves submerged in frustration and anxiety. When we’re at that point – and many of us have been there – we know that we need more than just our gumption and sunny dispositions to make it through. We need faith in something greater than ourselves, because that is what gives us hope in the face of trials.

So, we must equip ourselves with the tools God has made available to us. Some of those things are fairly obvious: the Bible, prayer, a community of faith. But I believe our equipping goes deeper than that. We can also equip ourselves with a worldview and understanding that fundamentally shapes how we see and make sense of the capriciousness and cruelty of life.

When I worked at the *Louisville Courier-Journal* newspaper, in order to be productive I had to learn the lingo of the newsroom. I had to understand galleys and typeset and proofs and agate before I could do my job. Once I learned what those things were and how to use them, I was ready to contribute.

Similarly, as we grow in faith we have to equip ourselves with a vocabulary that helps us make sense of the world and what happens in life. Words like “grace,” “forgiveness,” “love,” “peace,” “hope,” “trust” inform and deepen our faith, but if we don’t equip ourselves with a understanding of their Christian meanings, we lose the effect of their power.

Let's take "hope" for example. Apart from a faith perspective, "hope" means wishing that something will turn out for the best. "I hope I win the lottery" or "I hope there are still some cookies left during Coffee Hour." But from a Christian perspective, "hope" is grounded in the goodness and the dependability of God's word. Through Christ's death and resurrection, we have been given reason to hope for the future. We don't hope that everything will be all right, because we all know too well that everything is not always all right. But we do know that no matter what happens, God is with us. So we have hope.

One of the ways we equip ourselves to handle real life is we learn the language of faith and what it means for us. But we can't do that by studying it in a book. For example, I can tell you that a transmission is a compact, enclosed unit of gears that facilitates the transference of force to create torque and speed in an automobile, but that doesn't mean I understand how a transmission works. The way we equip ourselves is through experience. I learn how things work by putting myself in situations to see them in action. We learn the language of faith but seeing grace, love, forgiveness, hope, trust in action.

One of the places we can do that is on Sunday morning. Hopefully when we gather, when we pray, when we sing, when we hear God's word, when we take communion, we are seeing how these words are lived out in the community of faith. But that can't be the only place we equip ourselves. To put the entire burden of responsibility for our spiritual formation on a 15-minute sermon or a once-a-week service is cheating ourselves out of the fullness of a vibrant faith. It would be like trying to gain an intimate understanding of the news by only reading the headlines on the front page. There's so much more we are offered by God, and so much more potential within us to tap into.

Remember the show "McGyver"? Each week, Richard Dean Anderson and his totally rad mullet would rescue people from precarious situations through his ingenious handyman abilities. For example, he would pick a lock with a soggy waffle or craft a nuclear bomb out of a roll of duct tape and some toenail clippings. McGyver could do a lot with a little.

At times, Christians function like the anti-McGyver. They do a little with a lot. God has equipped us with amazing gifts and talents. Paul tells us in Ephesians that people were gifted to be apostles and prophets and evangelists and pastors and teachers. That list could go on and on. But notice Paul doesn't say, "And then there are those folks who weren't gifted at all. Too bad for them." Every one of us has been equipped! God has given us what we need to live out a life of faith in the midst of difficult or trying circumstances.

Notice Paul's reasoning for why God gave people these gifts. If we were to ask Paul, "Why should we equip people with a Christ-centered faith that works in real life?" he would say, "to prepare God's people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up." Our gifts are not to be hidden or used for ourselves, but are to be used in service to other people.

This is how I know that this church is going to be OK, just as I believe that my family and I will be OK as we move into a time of transition. I know the future is unknown, I know that can be anxious or scary, but God has prepared us. God has given us the tools we need to deal with whatever life brings. We are called to hone those skills, to develop those gifts, so that when the time comes we can put them to use in service to the body of Christ.

In our denomination's tradition, we place a strong emphasis on what is called "the priesthood of all believers." That means that work of God isn't restricted to just the ordained clergy. We believe that everyone is a part of the priesthood, that everyone has gifts to use in service to God. In other words, everyone is a minister. Everyone has something to contribute. When I look at this church, I see an amazing group of ministers working hard to do God's will.

CCC is blessed with amazing lay leadership on the Board, an incredible search committee, a wonderful group of Sunday school teachers, a tremendous choir. Everyone has something to contribute. Even you. Especially you. God has equipped you.

There once was a boy who went to hear a famous speaker. The boy didn't know if there was a meal included in the event, so he took a lunch with him in case he got hungry. While at this function, the speaker's assistants realized that no one was in charge of getting refreshments for this large audience. One of the assistants saw this boy's lunchbox, so he asked the boy if he could borrow it. The assistant took the lunch – just a couple of fish and a few loaves of bread – to the speaker, who said a prayer and miraculously multiplied that simple meal into a feast big enough to feed every person present, with doggie baskets left over.

Do you know that boy's name? Me either. But not only did his simple act feed 5,000 people, his story has been instrumental in bring millions of people to faith. There's no such thing as an insignificant ministry. We all have a gift to share. We all have been equipped to help build up the body of Christ.

On June 29th, as I was studying the book of I Timothy, I wrote this in my sabbatical blog: "Paul talks about Timothy's calling here as if it's an ongoing process. Timothy wasn't called once and for all. Instead, each day he is called to fight the good fight, to keep the commands without spot or blame. A calling is a perpetual thing. We are not called just to do something; we are called to be something, and that takes a lifetime to get right."

My prayer for this church, now and in the future, is that you will continue striving to answer God's call. It takes a lifetime to get it right, and there are going to be missteps along the way. But the past doesn't have to dictate the future. I know this church has faced difficult transitions before. I know the changes you face may concern you. But you are the body of Christ. You are God's people. God has given you these amazing gifts – hope, trust, love, forgiveness and your own individual talents – and commissioned you to put them to use, to speak the language, to redefine challenges as opportunities. Never let the realities of life overshadow the fact that you have been equipped by God, and because of that, you can indeed handle anything. "The Lord never gives us more than we can handle." I don't know about that. But here's another saying I DO believe: "I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me."